



A Poet in Center City Pt.1
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Photo by Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum
Mike Land at Molly's Books, South Philadelphia, 2005
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#1

The story of my life in Center City begins on a hot August night outside Philly Java, on Fourth Street between South and Lombard. I had just re-met a poet named Christopher Severin. He was tall, a bit stocky, with a black bowl cut and a cherubic face. His cadence was distinctive— pressured, ironic, flippant on the surface. I had first met Christopher in Manayunk, on a semester break from Penn State a few years before. The circle he moved in, and led, was about poetry first, and what was then called ‘d’ magazine. The one night of the initial meeting, towards the end of ’97, Christopher was quiet. Yet he was ensconced in a social world that was about movement, change, and vitality— master class Bohemianism. I later learned, and was stunned to assimilate, that he had associates in Cheltenham and knew all about me. He knew about my class-confounding troublemaking with Jena in State College, about my stature as both the James Dean of my high school class and (for junior and senior year) a first-tier driver, with a red Jetta at my disposal. I related to him that night, as someone more experienced than me at poetry, as a gestalt context. He had po-jargonese at his disposal which I was soon to acquire but didn’t have yet, had done workshops and completed his BA. When he wrote to *dig in* to specific poems, it was studied beyond posturing, and hip to the Modernists as I was hip to modern philosophy but not Pound, yet (who had, as we well knew, grown up in Cheltenham too). So the hot August night was buttressed, consolidated, by a cold November night which preceded it, even if I had received a rejection slip from ‘d’. We were sitting at a table outside, overhung with foliage from trees, overlooking TLA video store across the street. Suddenly we were overrun with teenagers— street kids, who never knew much but concrete and pavement. Amoreena, the angel, was offered up, in all her raven-headed ingenuousness, to tell Christopher the secret she wanted him to know. As they hovered around us (Christopher having known some of them before), I had a revelation of the wild vitality of Center City Philly. There were modes of being hidden here, from Amoreena’s lean-in moves on out, which I had never experienced before. The suburbs had been slow and moderate; the college town I had known even more so; New York had been so brutish I registered very little at all. Center City was overwhelming in the right way— I had frissons from people and places, all in motion, going someplace. As I walked the long way back to 21st and Race, a magical moment had coalesced, and I knew that I had stepped like an actor into a role I could play— an avatar of channeling, directing, and reconfiguring the streets themselves. The stage was set.

#2

Fast forward into the spring— it's a chilly night in March. I'm sitting on a Septa train to Manayunk with Bill Rosenblum and Pete Lawson, two musicians. Christopher Severin is letting me run an open-mike night at a coffee-joint called La Tazza on Cotton Street. Bill, Pete and I are stoned on pot. I'm paranoid on the train that I might have to take a piss (Septa trains have no bathrooms). I've brought a carton of eggs to break on my chest. But I wimp out, made fuzzy by E weed— I give the eggs to one of the attendees. Bill is short and stout, wears glasses and rags— his day gig isn't much. Pete's a lanky redhead with a bushy red beard— how he maintains himself is a mystery. They're in the game to get high and have fun. At twenty-four, and in a state of constant excitement about what might happen in Philly, it's enough for me to get attached to them. I need man-power and they need guidance. Christopher is a figurehead in his own right, centered here on Main Street, but his scene is limited. The world converging around me is dynamic, shot through with people who mean it, but I'm obliged to shape it myself.

#3

There is the problem of mixing worlds and that nobody in Philly does it. Things remain segregated, and to the extent that Philly artists don't mix, the Center City art scene is all dark corners. What happens if you match Christopher with Bill and Pete? But I'm not worried yet. One of my compartments is filled by the Center City "Goth" scene. I meet the niche stalwarts— Lee and Damon Buckner, and Larsen Spurn. Lee and Damon are tall, black, mystical Christians and musicians. Lee is dominant, and always followed by a retinue of Goth kids— Center City raised, precociously sex-and-drugs oriented, attired in black leather pants, fishnet shirts, and chains. He plays a twelve-string acoustic guitar, and his songs are intense meditations on fairytale worlds— ghosts, goblins, vampires, demons. Prince to Syd Barrett to Ozzy Osbourne. Damon is calmer, more generous and hospitable, often with Lee to lend moral support. Larsen is their rival— a white, Europe-raised transplant with grandiose plans, whose front-man moves borrow heavily from the 80s New Romantics. He sings in a band called Station. The night I meet him at the Khyber signifies— the whole Center City Goth crew are there, and I give Larsen my multi-media sales pitch. We're all young and moving fast— the vibe is right, and the dope. Still, I have to get used to the rough edges these characters live with— no health insurance, bills which can't be paid: scattershot approaches to leading a solid life. I consolidate the rough streak I acquired in NYC.

#4

I have it in my mind to start doing things at coffeehouses, so I do. What Christopher and I do at Philly Java isn't particularly intense— we sit in the cozy back room, reading our poems. If other poets show up, so much the better. One thing I notice about Christopher is that he has a knack for graphic design. The fliers he designs for these open readings have a nouveau Dada feel, and the images are memorable, all done at the architect's office he works at in Manayunk.. The Last Drop, also, is available, and I arrange a show there for Lee and Bill and Pete. One thing I've already let go of is the need to be the main attraction. If you want to put a scene together, you have to know how to juggle egos; to hold a hollow emptiness in your consciousness for others to enter and establish themselves. Bill likes to work with a poetess named Dara March. He plays keyboards while she recites. I've invented a moniker for the series I'm putting together— This Charming Lab. Thank you Morrissey. The night of the show, the Drop overflows with Lee's minions. The proprietor of the Drop is fuming (for some reason) but the show goes on. And I've got my girl Joan there, she's Goth, and Larsen and Lee hate each other so Larsen is missing, and the thronged downstairs, green smoke fuzzing the room, is what I want forever.

#5

One thing I do with Bill Rosenblum is patrol Olde City and other neighborhoods, looking for venues. We're usually stoned when we do this; Bill teaches me the nooks and crannies around Center City where you can get stoned in the street. I'm in love with the Center City streets at night; they have an odd kind of peacefulness (especially when held up against the grisliness of NYC). Bill and I are walking down Second Street in Olde City between Market and Arch, and stumble across a joint called the Upside Down Café. It's run by an attractive African-American woman with a Jamaican accent: Mimi. She's accommodating and gives us the run of the place, to do events as we choose. Now, This Charming Lab has a home. The events we put on at the Upside Down didn't change much— we were “newbies,” and didn't have much draw. But we were doing multi-media, literature and music together (poets and bands) in Center City Philly, and I thought (perhaps) I could investigate trying to get This Charming Lab some press. I lived on a daily diet of both serious stuff and the jejune free-press weeklies (City Paper and Philly Weekly). I was to learn that the press is its own dark corner, not animated by too many specks of light, but specks to be cherished when you find them.

#6

Olde City is famous around Philly and the East Coast for its “First Fridays.” On the first Friday of every month, all the Olde City art galleries opened their doors and offered new shows, wine and cheese. As of the turn of the century, Philly has produced little to compete with New York’s century XX art scene. But the set-up is cozy and sensuous and it seemed logical at the time that on First Fridays This Charming Lab would set up shop at the Upside Down, which was advantageously placed to attract street traffic. Bill and Dara do spoken-word with keyboards, I read and play a few numbers on my acoustic, Christopher swooshes in to do his usual read-from-a-book (usually Pound) routine. Looking back, This Charming Lab was doing the right thing for itself— starting small, building gradually. But in some ways, I’m already dissatisfied— my ambition for some kind of grandiosity is getting the better of me. So I’m split in half— delighted by being in a new place, but frustrated by a small stage and an even smaller response. Sometimes I can forget this dichotomy in a haze of pot smoke, sometimes I get depressed. Tonight the ambience is just right to allow me to get lost in it all. The Upside Down looks decent— white tiled floors, glass façade. And I get dragged by crazy Jean Walsh, Sister Ghoulis, over to the Painted Bride once festivities are over at nine. She knew what buttons to push.

#7

I find myself, through Lee and Damon and Larsen, doing West Philly house parties too. That winter, Damon throws a house party the wildness of which I've never experienced. The drug situation is drastic—people are lining up to shoot H. Reach out and touch faith. Larsen is there (he doesn't mind Damon as much as Lee) with a stout, voluptuous blonde who looks like a porn star. We get righteously stoned, and then everything begins to move in slow motion. The rest of the night passes me by like a movie—I'm in a dark room with Larsen's date, but too paranoid to hit on her; I'm standing on the porch, watching someone (for some reason) dive over the railing into the front yard; I'm sitting ("like a spider," someone said) watching the Goth crew dance to Bauhaus; I'm noticing what everyone else noticed, that Lee failed to show up. Finally, at four a.m., I'm betraying my roots and phoning for a goddamned taxi. My truth is my truth—I'm not as nervy as these kids are. I don't need to suffer the torments of hitting the West Philly streets at four a.m. That's why there will always be an edge of unease, sometimes, between me and the other participants in This Charming Lab. I'm not as authentically city as they are. But the middle-class sense of self-worth and polish I have is useful to them, too.

#8

By March, I manage to score a date for This Charming Lab at the Khyber Pass. For this night, it has to be all music. All the Station characters are becoming important in my life. Larsen's guitar player, David, was raised middle-class by two professors in Australia, of all places. He and his brother are in Philly to attend U of Penn. David is there to do math, but his attitude is lax at best. He's as good-looking as Larsen, tall, broad, and jovial. He also prides himself on sleeping around. Our main topic of conversation is music. David has a fondness for "classic rock" which Larsen doesn't share. What's interesting to me about David is that working-class postures and attitudes fit him like a glove. He seems more authentic to the Center City scene than me. If jaunty downward mobility is the story of our early adulthood, David is more graceful and effortless about it. In any event, Station are to headline the Khyber show. Lee has become difficult to manage and I've had to exclude him. He's too narcissistic to participate in any scene. It's a shame—he writes compelling tunes. But any artistic scene requires that you be able to jump out of yourself at least part of the time, and he can't. Meanwhile, I'm having bizarre love affairs, Jean, Joan, on the side. They add, from Logan Square, to the general feeling of expectancy.

#9

Center City Philly is not just a conglomeration of artistic people for me but a conglomeration of places. I learn the character of different streets— Pine Street is genteel and refined, with several blocks devoted to antique shops and not much traffic. Walnut Street, the main thoroughfare of Center City, has everything all together— first-rate restaurants like Le Bec Fin, glamorous boutiques, four-star hotels, and, of course, Independence Hall. Chestnut Street, one block north, has a grungy feel— nothing fancy, but dollar-stores, low-end department stores, and (then) the old Sam Eric movie theater. South Street, several blocks south of Walnut and Chestnut, is (supposedly) *it*; the epicenter of Center City cultural life. But by the turn of the century, South Street has been commercialized, and even Zipperhead (a repository boutique of punk and Goth fashion where I buy my fishnet shirts) is on its last legs. What's hidden in the interstices is better than what's on the thoroughfares— Philly Java Company with its funky back room between Lombard and South on Fourth Street; the Last Drop Coffeehouse, with its high, coffered ceilings and French ambience at 13th and Pine; Dirty Frank's, the best of Center City's sleazy dive-bars, caddy-corner to it; and McGlinchey's, which serves cheap stout and lager and runs neck-in-neck with Frank's (Glinch has a better jukebox), wedged on 15th between Locust and Spruce (both inconspicuous streets with no particular identity). It's the hidden gems which make Center City for me; and I stick to them.

#10

What develops very fast for me in Center City is a need to prioritize. Everything seems to be leading me away from literature and into music; so music (for the time being) is what I decide to stick to for a while. I've kept contacts in New York and can record there almost whenever I want and for free. I try to shop these recordings around to Philly independent labels, with little initial luck. Center City, like the East Village in the late Nineties, has no in-built scene to speak of. At a young age, and sharp enough to be status-conscious (which Larsen and the rest of the Lab crew aren't), I drooled at the idea of getting signed. The first Khyber show is a one-off— I'm to be backed by a drummer and bass player who are only signed on for that show. As had happened in State College and New York, I had trouble finding musicians to play with. The night of the show (a chilly April night) is hectic, and the Station guys dominate it. They have a redhead named Nora, who David is apparently shagging, following them around with a video camera. Station are the headline act, and most of the crowd shows up to see them. To me, there's something profoundly joyless about the whole experience— not just because me and my music are relegated to the sidelines, but because the Station guys are “hamming it up.” They come across as attractive but irresponsible and (potentially) unprofessional. This Charming Lab has already established a few rules and folkways. One is that the after-parties have to beat the gigs. We roll, stoned, down the Olde City streets, too high to care about status— and the chill leaves the air.

#11

The vibe between Larsen and I is interesting— it’s clear to me that Larsen was raised working-class, but his parents are Europeans. Larsen has traveled all over Europe. He doesn’t necessarily fit into the Center City scene any better than I do. Larsen’s social niche falls between the Goth and punk scenes, and he’s perpetually obsessing over some girl or other. We’re both true-blue with the ladies. He’s not skeasy like the Cheltenham guys I grew up with— he nails his girls before he obsesses about them. I’m having some luck on that level too— we commiserate. Larsen’s angle is always the same— the guys who get the most (so to speak) also get trampled the most. It’s headed towards summer and we’re always stoned as we walk around. Larsen is ambitious but undisciplined— he’s not writing the Station songs. Mike, the bass player, runs the show from the side, and lets Larsen and David front the band. I sense quickly (and with alacrity) that Larsen could get me into trouble. The weed we smoke sometimes seems laced; we take joyrides in “ambiguously owned” cars (Larsen is good at “borrowing”). Larsen, during these years, has an odd light of luck around him which I’m instinctive enough to notice. To make a long story short, Larsen (with David on the side) effortlessly corrupts me. The system has to work, because I’m getting them gigs. There’s something in the bank for all of us.

#12

As summer rolls in, it seems to me that This Charming Lab needs to plan something big. A little press would be nice, but we haven't dealt with the higher rungs of bands yet. If I could get, for example, the Eyeliners onboard for a show, we'd finally have the right wattage. I put together some money and rent out the Killtime Warehouse in West Philly. It's usually used for punk shows and meetings of radicals, and it's run by a ring of junkies. Station will play, of course, and I've roped in the Eyeliners (an all-girl band who do girly schmaltzy indie-punk), and Bill and Dara, and a miscellaneous cast of others. About an hour into the show, and with very few people having shown up, I make a fatal mistake— I let the Eyeliners smoke me up. It's potent weed and I'm blitzed enough to begin enjoying myself. The problem is, at about ten p.m. throngs of people begin to show up to see the Eyeliners. I'm supposed to be collecting money at the door, and I'm too skittish and paranoid to do so. I try to enlist Bill and Dara to do it but they're even more non compos mentis than I am. It's a little disillusioning no one pitches in— This Charming Lab was supposed to be a co-op. If I'm the only one trying (and the Station guys are too high and mighty to do menial work, off chatting up girls), TCL isn't going to be what I thought it was, even as no one left.

#13

One thing I've noticed is that This Charming Lab isn't making me happy. I'm a bundle of nerves. The reason would have to be that what happened at the Killtime signifies— I'm running the show by myself. On the side are nice times— with girls, or fucking around with Bill and Pete on lazy stoned West Philly afternoons. But the business of trying to push a bunch of acts forward is wearing me down. My own tunes I'm trying to sell at these shows form a whole— “The Seduction of Sara Starr.” While I'm in shape to play them, nobody seems to listen. David does, and I appreciate it— but Larsen has a bunch of defenses up. So does Lee. Bill and Pete are unabashedly “junk-rooted,” and my tunes are too classicist for them. I always have an acute sense of my own smallness— and what's in the air is that the Philly free press has blacklisted us. We're either too unprofessional or too gauche, or both. No one in the Philly press corps likes my ambition, either. They don't want a scene in Philly, especially one which translates nationally or internationally. They like doing hit-and-run routines where they cast bands or performers up, then shoot them down again. I'm sharp enough to realize quickly— where music is concerned, I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is my first, and most hurtful, Center City tragedy, but I take it in stride.

#14

One branch I've got going which many of my friends don't notice is an interest in modern and post-modern art. By this time, I'm fascinated by post-modernity generally, and I learn the charmed names—Warhol, Nauman, Koons. Nauman, especially, attracts me— the West Coast creepiness of his early work (product, I can't help but believe, of high marijuana intake), matched with a penchant for absurdism, balance out the direct and uncompromising brutishness of the East Coast life I'm leading. My nightly routine, when I get home from Barnes & Noble (where I work as a bookseller) and when I happen to be alone, involves a pile of post-modern art books and approximately two bowls of weed. If I like Basquiat's playfulness, I'm repulsed by the vacuity of Jeff Koons; if Paul McCarthy is a bit too Willy Wonka, Ed Ruscha's sense of language, space, and minimalism in two dimensions gets under my skin. There's no one to talk with about visual art yet; but a young lady named Trish Webber works with me at B & N, and I have my eyes on her. When I walk around Center City stoned, I try to imagine what life would look like through a painter's eyes— West Philly, especially, is oddly picturesque, and many of the houses (half-dilapidated though they might be) are exquisite, is as all the architecture in Philly. I can still walk around with a good clean buzz on; if there is any danger, I don't notice it. For Bill and Pete and I, this is what everything reduces to— a buzz. We move forward on waves from the buildings.

#15

My interest in post-modern art leads me to the PMA. I'm stunned to learn that the modern art section actually has in it Bruce Nauman's "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths" neon as an installation. It also has Jasper Johns' "Painting with Two Balls," and a cache of late-period Rothkos. I'm even more stunned how Cubist Picasso looks up close; by the Renaissance art on the second floor; and by the Calder mobile I'd forgotten having seen as a kid. That I live a fifteen-minute walk away from the PMA is tremendous. Christopher appreciates my need to talk about such things, but the This Charming Lab musical crew turn a deaf ear. As summer wears on, we do Doc Watson's and the Philly Fringe Festival at the Upside Down. The Fringe people don't give us any special treatment; we're "local," and all their hype goes to national and international acts. The culminating Fringe show for us happens at a venue called La Tazza 108 (an extension of Christopher's La Tazza in Manayunk) at Front and Chestnut. I have friends coming in from New York and D.C. to play. But the lack of press around This Charming Lab shows; there's no buzz. Into the fall, I have the conviction that this has to end. We've been black-listed in Philly and there's no way up for us. Trish Webber seems to look at me strangely.